

Clean From The War

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Summary:

No one who dies in Derry ever really dies.

1. All The Way To The Bottom

Author's Note:

Title based on 'Hurts Like Hell,' by Fleurie

How can I say this without breaking
How can I say this without taking over
How can I put it down into words
When it's almost too much for my soul alone

I loved and I loved and I lost you
I loved and I loved and I lost you
I loved and I loved and I lost you
And it hurts like hell
Yeah it hurts like hell

I don't want them to know the secrets
I don't want them to know the way I loved you
I don't think they'd understand it, no
I don't think they would accept me, no

I loved and I loved and I lost you
I loved and I loved and I lost you
I loved and I loved and I lost you
And it hurts like hell
Yeah it hurts like hell

Dreams fight with machines
Inside my head like adversaries
Come wrestle me free
Clean from the war
Your heart fits like a key
Into the lock on the wall
I turn it over, I turn it over
But I can't escape
I turn it over, I turn it over

I loved and I loved and I lost you
I loved and I loved and I lost you

I loved and I loved and I lost you
And it hurts like hell

At the Townhouse, everyone is aggressively silent, and all eyes seem to be on Richie, which he can feel, and he doesn't appreciate.

He's always got a fucking audience, even when he doesn't want one, and he's sick of it.

They're all watching him limp out onto the sidewalk, like he's a crushed animal by the roadside, wobbling to his final resting place.

Maybe he is.

He's thinking about how expensive his fucking glasses were, and he has the money to spare, he thinks maybe his insurance even covers it in its entirety, but he doesn't want new glasses, he doesn't even care that his vision is fucked in that eye right now.

He doesn't care about what is maybe a slipped disc in his spine, he doesn't care that he knows, in his aching bones, that he's going to be the one to call Myra - he doesn't even know why he's been the designated one to call her, but he knows he is. He feels it in the air.

He could ask someone else to do it, he knows - Bill would do it without question, even. That would be admitting he couldn't do it, though.

It's all that's left that he can do for Eddie.

It has to be him, because it's all he can do for Eddie, anymore. It's the last thing he can do.

After digging out his lighter and Marlboros from his car, he ignores the heat of eyes on him, itchy beneath the skin with irritation, sits on the curb, and tries to light his cigarette.

His hand is shaking too violently, though.

Taking a seat beside him, Beverly takes out her own lighter, and lights it for him.

He nearly smacks her hand away, but he doesn't know if that has to do with leftover adrenaline that has nowhere else to go, or if he just can't take anymore pity. Either way, he restrains himself, but it takes effort.

She seems to sense this odd aggression about him, and so she doesn't sit too close to him, doesn't try to start a conversation, and, blessedly, stops looking at him.

"Thanks," he mumbles; he's thanking her for leaving him alone, without actually, completely leaving him alone - she understands this too, somehow, and nods in his periphery.

He thinks to himself, in a private sector of his brain, that it's odd he never fell in love with Beverly. He understands Bill always having a little flame in his heart for her - he probably always would, and he understands Ben, too. He thinks that she's good at reading what a person needs, and just delivering - it's an enviable skill.

Richie briefly remembers having a girlfriend in his sophomore year of college, and how in the second semester, her father had died suddenly of cancer. She'd been crying, and he asked her what he could do for her, to help her - she had snapped at him, in a grief he couldn't relate to at the time, and she'd said, 'stop asking me things! Stop! I don't know!'

After that, whenever Richie bumped into someone in some kind of need, some sort of grief, he'd do something simple, like do their dishes, or help them with their work, or walk their dog, or do their grocery shopping - simple shit. Shit that people in grief don't want to think about, don't want to put on other people, don't want to have to ask for.

He'd always been shooting in the dark, though.

Beverly has this way about her, that she knew he needed a cigarette, he needed *this* cigarette, he needed it right then, and he needed her to not say anything about it.

He wishes he could tell his fifteen year old self to not pick up the addiction in the first place; he never looked cool, anyway, and that

was the entire point at the time.

Eddie had been absolutely frantic - had gone on some tangent about how the addiction to nicotine is proven, "there are published *studies*, Richie, that the industries don't like people knowing, cause those things will give you all kinds of diseases! Don't you realize that nicotine cycles through the body in *half an hour!*? *Half an hour!* That means *every* half hour, for the *rest of your life*, you're gonna want another cigarette, Richie! There's rat poison in cigarettes, Richie! *Rat poison!* You are literally inhaling rat poison right now!" - Richie had blown smoke in his face just to get him to blush, and curse furiously at him.

Ben sits down beside Beverly, and looks at Richie's profile; apparently he didn't pick up on everything Beverly did, because his gaze is heavy, and nearly accusatory.

Richie tries his best not to let the unsettled rage that incites boil his blood.

"Did you ever write a poem?"

"Ben," Beverly admonishes calmly; she only means to say 'shush, Richie doesn't want to talk right now,' but Richie understands the question for what it is.

"He knows what I mean," Ben tells Beverly.

Richie turns his head to look at Ben, and his stare is hard - as if he's the one angry with Richie, and has every right to be.

And well, yeah. Maybe he is, and maybe he does.

Maybe it makes sense to be angry at Richie right now.

Maybe Richie is the reason Eddie's dead.

Maybe Richie should walk directly into oncoming traffic to avoid this conversation. Maybe that'll make everyone happy.

That's his career, after all. Chucks for days.

"No," Richie answers, exhaling a long string of smoke, "I don't write poetry."

"Did you ever tell him?"

At this, Beverly shifts her head between the two of them, "tell who what?"

"Bev, look at him," Ben insists, as though that's all the evidence he needs for his silent claim; maybe it is.

"I didn't say shit," Richie mutters back, turning his attention back to the asphalt, "There's nothing to say."

"Bullshit."

"Ben, I gotta tell you, I'm a good ten seconds from punching you in your very chiseled jaw, okay? So, now is not the time -"

"Now's *not the time*?" Ben asks hysterically, looking outraged, "When's a good time for you, Richie? We were the same - we were the same, this whole time, you and me, and you aren't going to fucking talk about -"

"Let's say there *was* something to say, Ben," Richie challenges, tapping ashes off between his fingers, "What fucking difference would it make?"

"It could help you, Richie -"

"Nothing can help me."

The Losers move like a wave, all in this stupid synchronicity that they've always had, and stare at Richie worriedly.

"Stan was my best friend," Richie tells the old road, pretending he's alone, sniffing absently, "He was my best friend. I don't hang out with anyone anymore. I'm a crotchety old man now, I'm bad at making friends. I used to be good at it - I used to be... young, I guess. And then I grew up, and I couldn't make friends anymore, and you know what? The thought of making friends as an adult is a fucking nightmare, so fine. I'm alone. I was alone since I left college, and

even then, those friendships were weak, and shit, so, who cares? Right? I barely remember them. But I remember Stan.”

He inhales deeply, blows out a billow of grey, and elaborates, “I was so proud of him. Him and his stupid fucking birds, and being dedicated to his family’s game night, and shit - Stan Uris was the best friend I ever fucking had, and I lost him, he fuckin’ left me here, he left, and he’s not coming back. He can’t come back this time. So, that’s how this visit starts, right? I come back to Derry, I remember that - hey, you know what? I’m not alone in the world! Sure, I spend most nights eating take-in, alone in my apartment, and I have no one around to tell me I should be in bed by three a.m, because there’s no one around me, in my - my fuckin’ sphere, you know, to tell me that shit, to take care of me, but I came back to Derry, and I remembered Stan, and I thought - he’ll fix it. Stan will show up late, cause he’s a pussy, cause he’ll think about welching, and then he’ll double back, because he’ll know it’s the right thing to do, and he was always so *about* that bullshit, like there was a right and wrong way to be a person.”

He takes another long inhale, “and he’s dead. My best friend. That’s a pretty mean joke, universe. You know? That’s pretty fucked up. I get to remember I’ve got a friend out in this big, scary world, and he’ll be there soon, and he’ll make me feel not so alone anymore. He’ll notice the lines around my eyes, and say shit about drinking more water, and how the average adult needs between eight and ten hours of sleep, but he’s dead. So, no one says that shit, cause the only person who would was Stan, and Stan’s dead now, Ben.”

Kicking at some loose gravel, Richie gestures with his hand, knocking some ash off the end of his cigarette, “and then I come back, and I remember fuckin’ - little Georgie Denbrough, I remember how much he loved Bill, how cute he was - he laughed at all my jokes, even when Stan and Bill threatened to never let me in their houses again for speaking - he was my little buddy, man. He was a cute, good kid, and I step into this town, and I remember that we lost him, and that I was a kid with no fuckin’ coping mechanisms, so I fuckin’ tried to fight Bill about it.”

Someone makes a snort of a laugh, a kind of exhale that stutters, and so it’s probably Bill, but Richie can’t bear to look for the source.

"I see the marks on Beverly at dinner, and I know we've all decided, like, silently, for some reason, to not fucking talk about it? But, uh, I'll be honest here - after killing Bowers, I feel pretty good about shoving an axe into the back of her husband's head," Richie offers, "I'll throw up again, probably, but I am full of *just* enough rage to get it done, I think, and you know what? I'd like to. And *Mike*, you guys. Mike's been here - *stuck* here - I didn't even remember I fucking abandoned him in this shit hole, and Eddie's popping pills left and right, cause he found a carbon copy of his mother to worship, and I'm so fucking angry with myself, I don't even know how I survived our first reunion without having a fury-induced stroke."

Another long inhale, long exhale, and Richie wonders if he's ever had an audience more rapt before.

"Then we all go out on our little adventures into the town that fucked us up beyond comprehension, shit we can't tell any sort of specialist, because we'd all get locked up like our old pal Henry, so we're all just gonna internalize it, right? That's the way we've always done it. And here's the thing, Ben - here's the thing..."

He looks to Ben, notices absently that Beverly is covering the lower half of her face, and possibly crying, and that Mike and Bill are hovering close behind them.

"You and I aren't the same."

"Richie," Ben starts, but is intercepted.

"You found Beverly, you remembered each other, you protected each other, you saved each other, and I'm happy for you - and - okay, I'm not - I'm not happy for you - I think, given some time, I'll be able to be happy for you guys, but I'm not right now, if I'm being honest, because I have no room in me right now for happiness, especially happiness for anyone else."

Taking a last deep, smoked breath, Richie blows a ring of smoke, then throws the remains of his cigarette onto the ground, crushing it under his waterlogged shoe.

"Eddie died protecting me, so now's not a good time, and there will

never be a good time, Ben,” Richie tells him, staring down at the dirty hems of his jeans, “The good times got fucking impaled by a monster, right in front of me - right on top of me - and it should’ve been me -”

“*Richie*,” Beverly chokes out.

“Shut up - shut up - it was supposed to be me,” Richie insists, “I don’t care if Eddie loved his wife like a wife, or like his mother, or whatever the fuck - he *has a wife*. *Has*, right? Cause she doesn’t know he’s dead yet. He’s still alive in her world. So, she *has* a husband right now. She doesn’t know that his body is rotting under the fucking Neibolt House right now -”

“Richie, th-that’s enough -” Bill begins.

“Oh, what, you can leave him there, but you can’t fuckin’ cop to it?” Richie snaps, glaring at Bill, “How about *you* call his wife, Bill? Hmm? How about *you* do it. How about *you* tell her he’s gone, that he’s never coming back, and you’re so sorry, you’re so sorry Eddie died for a piece of shit comedian she’s never heard of who doesn’t have a wife, doesn’t have a family relying on him to come home - and you know what, Ben?” Richie turns his rageful attention back to Ben, points shakily at him, and says, “That’ll be a great time. While Eddie’s wife becomes hysterical over the phone, I’ll turn to you, and say, ‘hey, Ben, buddy, isn’t it about time we bond over the fact that we both met our soulmates in Derry, as children, and never loved again? Isn’t it about time I *come out* to all of you, right here and now, right while this woman weeps over the man she had as a loving husband, that I never could? Isn’t this so *healing*, Ben? Don’t I look like a million *fucking* bucks now? Doesn’t it seem like talking about this helped oh-so much?”

“Jesus Christ, Rich,” Mike murmurs.

Richie stands up, brushing off his knees, “I feel great, Ben. Superb. I lost my best friend the same day I remembered I had one, I remembered how much of a shit friend I was to Bill, Mike - even to you - I got to see the evidence that none of us could protect Bev, but also couldn’t say shit about it, because apparently that wasn’t on the agenda, I got to feel useless, and helpless, and then I watched the

love of my life die violently, in an effort to save *me*, a piece of shit who wouldn't have been missed like he is. I'm so glad we had this talk. I'm so, so glad I'm about to go shower off what little remains of him, and find his shit to pack up for him, since he can't, and send it back to his home, to his grieving wife. I'm so thrilled to call his wife. Won't that be a load off, right? Telling Myra Kaspbrak that she needs to come to Derry, because her husband's body needs to get dug up? That'll be peachy. This'll be fun."

Ben stands, as if he's going to approach Richie, but he doesn't move.

Beverly cries into her hands, and Mike has a hand on Bill's shoulder, keeping him planted to the ground, rather than, possibly, tackling Richie to the ground, and pummeling him.

Richie thinks he'd prefer the pummeling.

"Tell Beverly you love her, man. Just do it," Richie encourages him, voice kinder than before, "Say it, and say it every day, for the rest of your lives together. When it's three in the morning, and you're up with nightmares you can't verbalize, you've got someone to tell you to come to bed, and that's beautiful - that's - that's some shit I can't even imagine having. Recite your poetry, write a new one every Goddamn day, for what it's worth - kiss her - even if you only ever get to do it once, it'll be more than I got to do - and please know you are one of the luckiest motherfuckers in the fucking world."

Shifting his weight, Ben's expression softens finally, and Richie knows it's because his eyes are watering.

He doesn't want to cry again.

He notices a weathervane on top of a house nearby, and focuses on that instead of Ben's face, because he's pretty certain he'll cry again, if he does.

"Everything I have to say, Ben, is deep in the ground on Neibolt Street. Anything that was ever worth saying is deep in the ground, and nothing's going to help. Nothing can help me, Ben, because *this*?" Richie gestures vaguely at himself, and their surroundings, "This shit doesn't heal with time. Time can't fix this one. It's Hell."

He steps away from the Losers, back toward the Townhouse, and starts making his way to the door, “it’s Hell, all the way to the bottom, Ben.”

There’s no door-slamming - he’s too tired and old for that shit. He just walks into the Townhouse, climbs the stairs like they’re Everest, and when he makes it to the shower in his room, he steps in with his clothes on, because it doesn’t feel like much matters anymore.

Operating like a normal person isn’t even an option now, if it ever was.

He thinks he’ll probably throw these clothes out, anyway, before he leaves.

He sits down in the tub, watching the grime, dirt, blood, and everything else the quarry water left on him swirl down the drain.

He sees some blood leave from under his nails, and he’s so sure it isn’t his blood, his diaphragm contracts, forcing an odd sob out of him, but he swallows it before it can turn into anything more desperate, or loud.

To tear his eyes away from the sight of Eddie leaving him all over again, he tilts his head back against the tiles, shutting his eyes against the rising steam, the splattering of low water pressure against his broken glasses, and there, on the floor of the tub, fully clothed, Richie wonders if Hell has a bottom at all.

2. Because I Heard Him

When Eddie opens his eyes, he recognizes Stan immediately.

His mouth opens, shock, happiness, fear, all battling it out in his body, and he goes to sit up and hug him, but a hand on his chest stops him.

“Relax,” Stan tells him, “You’re hurt. I’m fixing it.”

Hurt? Eddie wonders, *I thought I died.*

“You did,” Stan says calmly, “I did, too.”

Finally looking down, Eddie sees Stan’s transparent arm reaching through the hole in his torso, sliding a thoracic vertebrae into place, careful, like a game of Jenga.

It comes to Eddie’s attention then too, that the only light is coming from Stan himself, as if he were radioactive, casting a faint glow in what is otherwise dark as tar.

“What -”

“I’m not using it, so you can have it.”

Eddie quirks a brow at him, unable to think of anything to ask except, “but aren’t you coming back?”

Pausing in his work, Stan looks up to Eddie, and smiles sweetly, his brows pulling in.

“No, Eddie. Not this time. We’ll meet again, though. Not in this world, but in a bunch of others.”

“But -”

“No,” Stan repeats more firmly, “Listen, I - I regretted it, okay? I could’ve... I could’ve helped. I could’ve done something. I wasn’t like the rest of you, though - you all remembered things in bits, and pieces, but something was different for me. When Mike called me, I

remembered it all - *all of it* - and all at once. I couldn't... I couldn't do it again. I'm sorry."

"Hey," Eddie begins gently, touching Stan's cheek, "it's okay, Stan. No one's mad at you, and frankly, none of us blame you either - we all nearly bailed at some point, too. We just miss you. We... we'll never really feel totally right, without you. That's all."

"I guess we'll just all have to find ways to be okay," Stan says with a sigh, "I'm happy to be able to do this, though, Eddie. So, I regret the whole... the whole thing, but not this. I'm glad I can give this to you."

"Uh, about that," Eddie mutters, looking down at himself, pulling his hand back, "what are you doing, exactly?"

"It punched a hole through your spine, part of your lung, part of your stomach, and like, right by your heart. I barely understand how I'm doing any of this, so don't ask, but I felt you die, and I knew I could help. So, I got myself here. I just - I was asleep, and then I was awake, and I knew I had to get to you. I gave you some of my back, and I took out the crumbly part of your spine, and put the functional part of mine in."

"Wait - this - what you're putting in me right now is *your spine*? But you're a *ghost*!"

"I know, right?" Stan laughs, seeming to shine more brightly, "I can't explain it, Eddie. I think it's cause you died in Derry, though. People here - they aren't really dead, if they die here. The same way that the people who live here aren't really alive. It's a weird limbo. If I'd left you for long enough, you would've passed into another world, but I heard Richie screaming, and you know how he is -"

"Richie?" Eddie asks, suddenly overcome, "Oh my God - oh my God, did he make it out?"

"Yeah, kind of," Stan answers.

"What the fuck do you mean '*kind of*!'?" Eddie exclaims.

Rolling his eyes at Eddie's reaction, Stan extrapolates, "I mean, I

watched him try to lay down and die next to you. Mike, Bill, and Ben literally had to manhandle him out of here, the entire way back to the surface. He was gonna turn tail, and run back to you, Eddie. He literally kicked and thrashed like a child, and screamed for you the entire time everyone else was saving his life. So, he made it out, but he didn't want to."

"... Jesus," Eddie mumbles.

"Yeah, I think seeing you again might actually give him a heart attack," Stan says with a smile.

"Wait - I'm gonna see them again?"

Stan looks at him, as if exhausted, "Eddie, I'm fixing you. I'm giving you the part of my lung that you're missing, the part of my spine that you had broken, and my stomach. I can replace some of the flesh, but that's harder to, like - sew on? I don't know what I'm doing here, exactly, I'm just..."

Sighing again, Stan's shoulders slacken, and then he says, "listen, I met a young man - Danny. He lives a few hours away from Derry, but in Maine, with his mother. I don't know how he knew me, or saw me, but he wasn't frightened. He looked at me, and we were in... I don't know - a hallway? It was as if I was nowhere, but I could see him sitting on the foot of a bed, in a normal bedroom. He looked at me, and asked if I needed help. I told him I wasn't sure where I was, but I needed to get to my friends. He said 'you must have something very important to do, because you're nice, and that's not what you all usually are.' I imagine he thought I was a ghost, too. Maybe he sees ghosts a lot."

"Uh-huh," Eddie nods, brow furrowed, trying desperately to grasp what Stan is saying to him.

"Anyway, he said I was 'like him,' - he said, 'you have the shine too, I'm sorry I couldn't meet you before you died.' So, he definitely knew I was dead, but I have no idea what the other shit meant. I told him I knew you'd been hurt, and he said that, if I'm not using my body anymore, I can give it away. So, I'm... I'm giving it to you. Okay?"

Tears well up in Eddie's eyes, and he asks, "can't I - I don't know - give you part of my soul, or something, and bring you back?"

Stan laughs wetly, "Eddie, this is my soul - my soul is fine. My body is done, though. And I - this is what I can do, Eddie. I couldn't face It again. I was - I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry I left you all to defend yourselves without me, that I was such a coward -"

"Stan, no, no - you're not a coward, you're not -"

"It's fine," Stan insists, "It's only fine because of this, though, Eddie," Stan gesticulates at what appears to be Eddie's stomach repairing itself, "Danny said I'd know what to do when I saw the wound, and he was right. I don't know *how* I know these things, or how it is I'm seeing who I'm seeing, and doing everything I'm doing, but it's all loud and clear. It's because I died that I can do this for you, and that makes me okay with this, okay? I... I think I'll be able to pass, and be - be happy, you know? No regrets anymore, if I get to do this for you. Save you."

"But, you -"

"I made my choice, and saving you will make me okay with it. Really okay with it. Okay?"

Eddie doesn't answer, because he's not really okay with it, but if it's what Stan needs, he'll be quiet.

Happy to have Eddie to talk to, Stan goes on to tell him that he's actually very comfortable, being dead, but he misses his wife, and he hears it everytime one of the Losers speaks his name.

He tells Eddie that he's looking forward to whatever comes next, once he's done sewing Eddie back up like Frankenstein's Monster. He even manages a joke about how it's a good thing they're of similar height, or the column of spine Stan gave him would've really caused some trouble for him.

Once he's done patching Eddie up as well as he can, he tells him, "there will definitely be scarring on your back, and chest here, but you should be alright now. I'm going to bend some of the debris out

of the way, but if you lose sight of me, or something, just follow the sound of water. This all leads to the Barrens.”

“Okay,” Eddie agrees, standing up, “but... stay with me as long as you can, okay?”

Stan smiles kindly at him again, and nods back.

They walk beside each other through the ruins of It's lair, and the completely collapsed Neibolt House, and Stan moves whatever Eddie can't, with some type of telekinetic ability he swears he didn't have before dying.

Eddie worries aloud about how recently he'd gotten a tetanus shot, and Stan laughs at him, “God, I missed you, Eddie,” he says, and Eddie laughs with him, because, yeah - he can hear how silly the concern sounds, after dying horribly, already.

Eddie asks about the birds Stan had last seen, and he says, “the last bird I saw was a Summer tanager, actually. It was beautiful.”

They poke fun at Bill, and how everyone's single critique of his books is that the endings are always terrible; Stan laughs at this too, asking, “is it true? I was not much of a horror-genre-reader.”

Eddie shrugs, “I dunno, honestly. I didn't read them, either. I watched a show based off of one of his book series, though, and I'm waiting for the finale, so I don't know yet, the ending could very well suck.”

They discuss Beverly and Ben, and Stan voices his hope that they ‘get themselves together soon.’ Eddie knows what he means, so he doesn't ask more about it - he hopes they do, too.

Eddie tells Stan about Richie screaming at a random child in a restaurant, because he doesn't write, or recall his own material, and Stan has a very good laugh at that. He follows it up, though, by saying seriously, “you know, Richie's a more private guy than anyone really knows. He seems like an open book, but that's all just for show. He was always like that. I bet his real material would be really good.”

They both lament that Mike was in Derry, alone, for so long, and Stan

falls quiet for a while after that, clearly struggling with an unspoken guilt. Eddie feels it, too.

Eddie tells Stan that Ben lost all his chubbiness, and he looked like he “probably does crossfit shit.”

Stan shakes his head, tscking, “he was always such a mensch, though! There was never a need for him to lose the weight.”

“I agree - I mean, he kept up with us fine, and we were all like rockets taking off on our bikes. I think life just did to him what it does to us all, you know? Made him feel all... weird about being himself.”

“Yeah,” Stan agrees, “yeah, life can do that.”

Stan asks after Myra exactly once, and Eddie shakes his head, “that’s... that’s a change I need to make right away.”

“Hm,” Stan answers, “I’m sorry.”

“Not as sorry as I am,” Eddie commiserates; they smile at each other, and continue their chatting through every jump, duck, and squeeze through pipes, and still-crumbling structures.

It’s pleasant, and Eddie feels sorry that the others won’t have such a pleasant conversation with Stan again.

He regrets that he won’t, either.

They eventually come to an opening, see sunlight, and greenery, and Eddie’s heart starts pounding furiously, nerves rattling him.

“It’s gonna be okay, Eddie. You’re gonna be fine.”

Eddie turns to look at Stan, and says, “I guess the others will believe me about this, cause it can’t be the weirdest shit to have happened to any of us.”

Laughing, Stan tells him, “yeah, I guess so. Hey - do me a favor?”

“Anything,” Eddie swears.

"I left a long note for my wife, and letters to all of you guys, too, though I doubt you got them yet - but, I... I didn't get a chance to apologize to Richie. Just... he was my best friend, you know? And I think it's cause he was so... he was suddenly so alone, and so scared that it - it's like he scared me out of being dead - like he shook me awake, cause he was too frightened to go out into the world alone again. Just let him know that I know he loved me, and I loved him too. Tell him that I saved you, and I'm glad I did, but also that... that I did it *because* I love him, because I heard him. I don't want him to be alone anymore, Eddie. I want Richie to be happy."

"I want that too," Eddie says softly.

"Mm," Stan hums, "Good. I love you, Eddie. I love all of you. I always did, and I always will. Do your best to keep Richie in line, okay? God knows what he's wrought upon the world the last twenty-something years without either of us there to keep him in check."

A tear slips down Eddie's face, and he wishes he could hold Stan again, but he has a feeling that as soon as he reaches for Stan, he'll vanish.

"I will," Eddie promises.

"Be good to yourself, Eddie. I promise we'll see each other again someday."

Earnest as ever, and trying his best not to cry anymore, Eddie nods again, and Stan laughs, tears in his throat, "okay - okay, get out of here, man. Step into the light. Shake off all that darkness. You've got Losers to give heart attacks."

"I love you, Stan."

"I love you too, Eddie."

With one more lingering stare, Eddie turns away, and follows Stan's instructions - he steps out into the dying light of the Derry sunset, and takes a deep breath of fresh air.

His lungs don't feel any different than they did before he entered the house, his stomach is in good enough condition to feel hungry, his

heart feels fine, and while his back and chest hurt a lot, he mostly feels fine for a fellow that was very recently impaled, and probably died of organ failure.

He turns around to thank Stan for the umpteenth time, but Stan is no longer there.

Eddie smiles, but he cries too.

There's nothing left to do but walk, though, and so he does - he walks back into town, looking precisely as he is; risen from the dead.

3. The Man You Love

After his too-long shower, Richie throws out his soaked clothes, and braves the highly, emotionally charged lobby to get Eddie's room key - while it's evident that they were all just talking about him, no one says anything to him, which he appreciates.

Seeing as his car is already packed with his own shit, Richie returns to Eddie's room alone, to figure out what all needs to get sent to his home, and what contact information for Eddie's New York home, and wife is available to him there.

He throws out the meaningless pills, and sees that there's little work for him to do otherwise; Eddie's suitcases are still neatly packed, though enormous, and Richie finds instantly that they smell richly of him.

Unable, or just unwilling to stop himself, Richie tears off his patterned button-up shirt, letting it fall to the floor, and reaches into Eddie's suitcase, grabbing a soft, off-white jacket.

He takes a deep breath of it, and shudders, curling it close against his face, full of a pain he's never felt before - one he doesn't have a name for yet, other than *Eddie Kaspbrak*.

It feels permanent, this shiny, new Eddie Kaspbrak Hurt. It feels a lot like he'll spend everyday reminded of it, that his body won't let him forget again; that the creaking of his bones will groan out 'Eddie Kaspbrak,' and the gurgling of his empty stomach will growl, 'Eddie Kaspbrak,' and he'll clench his jaw in his sleep, he'll clench it so tightly even when he rests that when he wakes, he's sore, and nervous, and the strained muscles there will grind out, 'Eddie Kaspbrak.'

It will be the kind of injury that will have him hating red lights at busy intersections, because it will allow him too much time to sink into his own head, and hear it singing, over, and over, 'Eddie Kaspbrak,' 'Eddie Kaspbrak,' - 'don't you remember?' 'Don't you remember now?' 'Wait for the light to turn green, maybe don't move at all, hope someone hits you - because you can feel him here, in the

emptiness, while you wait.'

It will be the kind of injury that will have him dreading his sleeping hours, it will make him hate certain corners of his living room, make him contemplate getting a pet so he has a reason to get up in the mornings.

He thinks he might buy whatever brand of deodorant, and cologne Eddie uses, if he finds them in his toiletry bag. Not to use them on himself, but to have them in his apartment.

I'm sick, Richie thinks to himself blandly; it's not like it's news to him.

Once he's done torturing himself, he puts the jacket on, swearing to himself it's all he'll take of Eddie's. He has no idea if he'll be able to keep his word, though, because he's usually a thieving little shit head, and that, at least, has not changed for twenty-seven years.

He finds that Eddie has tags on his suitcases, all with his home address, his cellphone number, and Myra's cellphone number.

It's crouched in front of Eddie's suitcases, contemplating what the fuck he's going to tell Myra Kaspbrak, that he hears a commotion downstairs he can't readily identify other than 'people noises.'

He sighs deeply, wondering if maybe the other Losers were already fighting amongst themselves again; they had clearly been discussing him earlier, right before he walked into the room. Maybe they were all starting to feel particularly confrontational.

It'd be a perfectly shitty way to end the worst few days of his life - all of them falling out, before parting ways again.

He ignores it, unwilling to entertain anymore fighting for the time being. If Bill wants to punch him in the face, he can do it later.

Right now, he takes a suitcase tag in hand, and his cellphone in the other; it somehow survived the battle, though Richie has no explanation as to how.

He complains in a huff about the screen protector having cracks in it, though, just to be a bitch.

He unlocks his screen, pulls up the phone, and plugs in Myra's number, staring at that tag: **Myra Kaspbrak; Spouse.**

"God, fuck, *what* am I going to tell her?" Richie asks no one, dropping the tag to hold and massage his forehead.

Hallmark should make cards for these types of situations; a whole line of awful cards for bad feelings, and awkward situations.

Mildly Concerned Greetings! Looks like you gained the weight back! Sorry to see it!

Hope these holidays are happier now that your emotionally unavailable parent has died! It's what we're all thinking!

Our Condolences! About all of it, really! Just look around! This is a nightmare!!

Thinking of You! And also thinking of your husband, because I was deeply in love with him, and he also happens to be dead now! Sending Thoughts & Prayers!

"Fuck," Richie utters again.

What the fuck do you say to the woman that married the man you love? How the fuck do you say, 'he's dead,' to the person it will pain to hear - potentially - as much as it hurts you to know, and when she inevitably asks 'how,' and 'why,' how in the fuck am I supposed to say, 'bravely, and for me.'

How does Richie tell this woman that her husband isn't coming home? How does Richie *not* tell her that Eddie was the love of his life? How does he get on with the day - with all the rest of the fucking days that are left in his life, when Eddie is not there? How the fuck is he supposed to do any of this?

He imagines their home, suddenly - he's imagining that phone ringing, and this woman, this woman that looks like a younger version of what Richie remembers Sonia looking like, picking up the phone, and he feels like a collapsing star.

Instead of thinking more about what he ought to say to her, how he

ought to word himself, he thinks about the house itself - where the phone lives, where it will ring, and how loud it will be in the empty halls. The house is probably ridiculously tidy, and minimalist. It's probably got wildly oversaturated medicine cabinets, and their guest bedroom probably has an insane thread count, because, based on all the brand names in Eddie's bags, Richie is getting the idea that he was a high maintenance guy.

He runs his finger over the button of a collared shirt, and wonders what Eddie looked like, getting ready for work in the morning. He was probably so handsome in his suit, and tie.

There's a brief daydream beginning, something about Richie straightening out Eddie's tie for him in the morning, standing too close, being proud of his husband, standing in Myra's place, leaning in for a kiss, but then -

"Richie! Richie, get down here!"

It's Mike's voice.

Richie glares at the closed door, and calls back, "not right now, dude! I'm about to make the worst phone call of my life! Can I get a fuckin' minute?"

"Hold the fuckin' call, Richie! Get your dumb ass down here! Now!"

Infuriated, Richie shoots up, storms out of the room, down the hall, up to the top of the stairs, and shouts, "what!? What's so Goddamn important it had to -"

The Losers are all standing there, holding each other, crying, surrounding Eddie at the middle, all of them at the foot of the stairs.

Eddie is covered in dust, grime, blood, dirt, all sorts of shit, but he's smiling shyly up at Richie, glassy-eyed, radiant like a fucking idyllic springtime sunrise, looking mournful, but happy too, and he's got color in his face, and a glimmer in his eyes, and he's *alive*.

"Richie," he says - simple as fucking anything, not a trouble in the world.

Richie means to say something back, but he blacks out before he can get anything out.

4. The Sun

“Richie - buddy, hey - wake up -”

“His eyes are opening!”

“Quick - who’s gonna tell him about his glasses?”

“Not it!”

“Not it!”

“Not it!”

“Not it!”

“Fuck, fine - I’ll do it. He’s gonna blame me, you know.”

“Is he wearing my jacket?”

“Well, I definitely don’t think Richie has ever shopped Ralph Lauren, so, unless he had this little number tucked away for a special occasion, he definitely stole it from your room.”

“He was in my room?”

“He w-was - yeah - he was g-gathering your s-stuff to send b-b-back to Myra, and c-call her.”

“Really? That’s... that’s really sweet of him. You know, to... to take on handling my affairs.”

“Maybe it was sweet until he stole your jacket.”

“It’s *Richie*, Mike. He’s the only person I can think of that can be sweet, and underhanded at the same time.”

“Eddie, listen, before you got here, we all talked - well, Richie talked,

mostly, but you and Richie *really* need to *talk* -”

Still coming back to the world of the living, Richie doesn't even compute his hand shooting up, but he's fully awake by the time he's choking Ben around his shirt collar, and dragging his face down to snarl at him, “you better shut the *fuck up*, dude.”

“Richie!” Ben greets gladly, uncaring of the death-grip Richie has on his collar, or the murder that must be flaring in his eyes, “You're awake!”

“There he is!” Beverly sing-songs, smiling sweetly at him, though her face still looks tear-stained; she's leaning closely over him, “Are you ready to give seeing Eddie another try, or are you gonna faint like a southern belle again?”

“I didn't *faint*,” Richie specifies, “I passed out. Fainting is something people with weak thighs do.”

“What?” she laughs.

“It's the thighs,” Richie tells her nonsensically, “People with sturdier thighs pass out, they don't faint. Us strong-thighed people of the world, we just plank, and fall. Much more dignified. Fainting implies a weakness of character, and buckling, which you think would have to do with the knees, Bev, but it's the *thighs* -”

“Richie, shut the fuck up, man - Eddie is not five feet from you - will you look at him?” Mike interrupts.

Swallowing with a click of his throat, Richie loosens his hold on Ben, looks away from Beverly, and then attempts to sit up; Bill and Beverly help give him balance, hovering nearby, as he rubs the back of his head, wondering if he's concussed at all.

He notices that his glasses are gone, and assumes the worst; they probably fell off his face when he hit the ground, and they are likely beyond salvaging. He looks forward to blaming Ben for it later.

Still working his way through some black spots in his vision, Richie squints at the people surrounding him, because anyone further than a foot from him is blurry, and while he doesn't like admitting it, he's

forced to say, "I literally can't see shit. I see an Eddie-shaped thing a few feet in front of me, but I'm not totally convinced I'm not still unconscious, though, so -"

"I'm really here."

That's definitely Eddie's voice.

Richie struggles to swallow another lump in his throat.

"Uh... h-how?"

"Stan."

Maybe hospitalization would be a good idea; Richie bursts into laughter, his eyes prickle with tears, and he half-acknowledges the worried noises the other Losers make as he lowers himself back onto the floor, to lie down again.

Holding the hearts of his palms against his eyes, he shakes, his knees pulling up, and feet turning in like a kid. He feels ridiculous, and not in the way he usually intends to - not ridiculous in the way that benefits anyone else.

"Y-Yeah?" Richie croaks, "He hook you up with some extra lives - got you a power-up I didn't know about?"

"Sort of," Eddie answers, a smile in his voice, "There's stuff he wanted to say to you."

"Oh, *man*," Richie starts, pressing his hands harder against his eyes, feeling overly hot in his chest, face, and throat, "I - I can't. I can't do - do that right now. I - I'm -"

"It's okay," Eddie assures him, coming closer, "It can wait. It's okay, Richie. Uh - listen, there's a lot to tell everyone, but I really wanna shower. Can you stand?"

"Theoretically, sure."

"I don't really wanna be in that bathroom again - I was hoping I could use yours."

A protective streak runs through Richie, and he sits up again, scrubbing his hands through his hair, still a little damp from his own shower.

“Yeah. Come on, I’ll - I’ll - stand guard, or whatever.”

“Okay - thanks,” Eddie agrees, seeming far too calm - then again, he might be in shock.

Richie definitely is.

The Losers help Richie up off the floor, and while he plays it off like he didn’t just faint at the sight of Eddie alive and well at the foot of the stairs, and also like he isn’t on the brink of a massive meltdown, he thanks them quietly for their help.

He finds it odd that no one else offers to come keep guard of the room, but a few steps toward what he’s pretty sure is his door (he really can’t see the room number), he remembers that he abruptly, angrily come out to all of them, and confessed his undying love for Eddie in a fit of grief-induced rage maybe two hours ago.

And as far as Richie’s emotional intellect goes, that tracks.

They’re silent as they walk into Richie’s room, and Eddie starts peeling off crusty layers of clothes. A lot of items, like his jacket, hit the floor and sound hard to the touch - it’s not cute, but it does further solidify the idea that Eddie Kaspbrak is not a hallucination, and is, in fact, standing in Richie’s room with him.

Feeling uncomfortably detached from himself, Richie realizes he needs something to ground him. He feels like he’s floating above himself, outside himself - he’s so fucking lost, looking at Eddie Kaspbrak, knowing that Eddie Kaspbrak died in front of him not twelve hours ago, and there he is, Eddie Kaspbrak, disrobing patiently near the slept-in side of Richie’s rented bed.

This is so fucking surreal, Richie thinks to himself, an edge of panic to his thoughts.

Would he have a panic attack?

He might.

“Hey - I’m gonna go grab your toiletry bag -” Richie starts, gesturing toward the door, hoping he might be able to call for the help of someone who emotionally matured past sixteen.

“Can I use your stuff?”

“Huh?”

Straightening up from unlacing his shoes, Eddie walks more closely to Richie; unattached to his physical self for the most part, Richie only feels his eyes relax as Eddie steps up, no longer forcing Richie to squint.

“I wanna use your soap. You do *use* soap, right?”

“Fuck you,” Richie replies with a shaky smile, “Don’t you want all your prissy little designer brands?”

“Not if it means you leaving the room, actually, no. So - stay here, right?”

“Uh,” Richie utters thickly, “Yeah. Right.”

Eddie smiles kindly, and asks again, “okay, so, it’s okay if I use your stuff instead of mine?”

Why? Richie wants to ask, Are you doing the thing I was doing? Do you wanna smell like me? What is this? What are you doing? How are you in front of me right now?

“Yeah - fine.”

“Good,” Eddie confirms, backing away again to step out of his shoes, and peel off his socks with a look of reproach, “Ugh. This is so disgusting.”

“I just threw mine out.”

“Your socks?”

“My clothes.”

“... you just threw away all the clothes you were wearing?”

“Yeah, dude,” Richie sighs out, “It may alarm you, but I mostly shop at fuckin’ Walmart, so, it wasn’t a huge loss.”

Rolling his eyes dramatically enough that even Richie can see it from afar, without his glasses, Eddie huffs a laugh, and tells him, “well, *my* clothes are nice. I’ll get them fixed. Dry-cleaned.”

Beginning to giggle, Richie asks, “what the fuck dry cleaner’s is gonna take your murder-sewer clothes, dude?”

“It’s their fucking job, I’d be paying them -”

“They’ll probably ask what all the fucking fluids are, Eds, you’re better off hiring crime scene cleaners to get that shit out of your clothes -”

“Why would they ask me questions about -”

“About all the blood, and gore on your clothes!? Why would they ask you about it?! Oh, gee, man, I dunno, maybe they’ll worry you murdered someone? I’ve never met a dry-cleaning person who was like, eager to be culpable in a homicide -”

“Don’t pretend like you’ve ever even walked inside a dry-cleaner’s -”

“I have too! I had to pick up my prom suit from somewhere!”

“That was twenty-two years ago, asshole!”

“Oh, has the culture of dry-cleaning dramatically shifted in that time?”

“Oh my God, Rich, shut the fuck up!” Eddie half-shouts, and half-laughs.

Against all odds, Richie finds himself smiling, chuckling against the closed door of his room, and remembering how this was once enough.

Once upon a time, it was enough to have Eddie nearby, smiling, laughing, telling him to fuck off - it wasn't all he wanted, Richie *always* wanted more, but this was enough. It was enough to keep him afloat, while lost at sea, too deep in love.

In his grief, he forgot how simple it was to be in love with Eddie, and how, even though it hurt, it was good, it was nice - because Eddie would smile at him, just like that, just like he is now, and when Eddie smiles, it's like the sun coming up over the hills.

It's like the clouds parting just in time to bike to the quarry, it's like just enough cinnamon in his lemonade, it's like the floral, springtime wind in his hair, hearing "*Baby I Love Your Way*," for the first time on his dad's crackling car radio, a shitty, stolen beer on the Uris's back porch, sharing a giant pack of Now and Laters at the Aladdin, and the sound of 'summer break,' meaning something again.

It's everything worth saying, everything worth feeling - it's everything.

Everything.

"You okay?" Eddie asks.

Smiling at him still, Richie answers, "no. I'm not. Thanks for asking, though."

"I thought you'd, uh - that you'd be happy to see me," Eddie suggests with a faux, casual tone.

Richie laughs again, and explains, "you have no idea. Oh, man. You know - there's this cool Bantu word, it's one of those words that we don't have an equivalent for in English - it's Bilita Mpash. I'm probably mispronouncing it, but the point is, it's like - uh - it's the opposite of a nightmare, basically."

Eddie tilts his head like a curious dog, and Richie thinks to himself that he's painfully adorable, and then clears this throat, continuing, "it means an amazing dream - a perfect dream, a dream that makes you so happy, you wake up from it feeling new, and - it's the opposite of torment, it's the opposite of nightmare. And that's what this is like.

Right now. Like, I fell asleep in the shower, earlier, and maybe this is - you know... bilita mpash."

"You think you're dreaming?"

"I don't know what I think, but it sure fuckin' feels like I'm in the fucking Twilight Zone, so..."

"How can I help?"

Touch me. Make me feel that you're real.

"I dunno," Richie lies, "I'll keep you posted, though."

There were times, when they were young, that Eddie would have a preternatural ability to read Richie's mind. Usually, this was in specific scenarios, wherein Richie would be planning the execution of an elaborate prank, and Eddie would slam on the brakes right before Richie could give it follow through.

It's like he's transported back to that time, the way Eddie looks at him, like he knows exactly what Richie isn't saying; the same way Richie would be suspiciously quiet while he waited for his prankster to walk into his trap, and Eddie would just *know* Richie *wasn't* saying something.

Eddie gives him a familiar side-eye, but drops the issue, and eventually makes his way to the bathroom; he finishes disrobing in the shower stall, tossing his underwear, and jeans onto the tile floor, from around the curtain.

Richie worries that he's somehow coming off as predatory, or maybe Eddie knows - maybe Ben fucking squealed on him, or something, and he's playing a catch-up game that Eddie hasn't told him the rules to yet.

"You there?"

"Oh," Richie startles, sitting on the lid of the toilet, "Yeah. I'm here."

Words, and sounds seem hard to make right now so Richie falls quiet again, and, taking his sweet time in the shower (not that Richie's one

to talk - he spent a good hour under the spray, staring vacantly at the tiles across from him), ten minutes later, Eddie asks if he's there again.

Richie reassures him that he's still there twice before asking, "you want me to talk, or something?"

"Jesus Christ, Richie, I never thought I'd have to *ask*."

"You still didn't ask, technically."

"Because the next time I die, I never want it said that I, Edward Kaspbrak, ever asked Richie Trashmouth Tozier to keep talking."

Feeling young, and nervous, and emotions that maybe exist only in Bantu, Richie smiles shyly down at his shoes, and pulls the sleeves of Eddie's jacket over his hands, then brings his hands to his nose and mouth, inhaling at his palms.

He listens to the shifting water, the sound of someone moving about under the spray, and he smells his own shampoo mingle with the steam in the air.

"I was about to call Myra, when you - when Mike called me downstairs."

"Oh!" Eddie exclaims, "That reminds me!"

There's a moment's pause, and then a hand is sticking out from the curtains, holding out a gold wedding band, presumably, for Richie to take.

That doesn't compute, though, so Richie doesn't move.

What the fuck are you doing? Richie means to ask, but nothing comes out.

Eddie shakes his hand in aggravation when Richie hesitates, and only draws his arm back into the shower once Richie stands up, walks to the shower, and tentatively grabs it.

Pinching it between his forefinger and thumb, Richie asks numbly,

“uh... what do you want me to do with it, exactly?”

“Preferably? Cast it into the bowels of Mount Doom. Short of that... I dunno, Richie. Just hold onto it for me, for now. I’ll figure out what to do with it later.”

“Okay...?” Richie ventures, “Wanna... elaborate on that at all?”

“My marriage isn’t...” Eddie trails off, seeming reluctant, “...ugh. You’re just gonna laugh at me - nevermind.”

“Strangely, I’m not in a mood for laughing, dude, so I’d say it’s as safe as it’s ever been to spill your guts.”

There’s a long pause.

Richie briefly wonders if he was too rude to the figment of his imagination, and so it’s now gone forever.

“I’m a virgin still, you know.”

Staring at the band in his palm now, Richie doesn’t feel like laughing at all.

“Was it the germs? The germ stuff?”

Just by the tone of Eddie’s voice, Richie can tell that he wasn’t expecting Richie to be empathetic at all, to his confession.

Richie hates himself a little more.

“Maybe back in college,” Eddie excuses, sighing into the quiet, “Myra didn’t really want to have sex, though - like, at all. Ever. With anyone. And I was okay with that, because I didn’t want to have sex with *her* .”

“Huh,” Richie mumbles thoughtfully, “What’s the... like, what’s the relationship like?”

“You really wanna know that shit?”

No, I really don't. I don't like thinking about you being with someone else

- *choosing someone else.*

"I dunno. Are you happy?"

"I just handed you my wedding ring, dude - take a fucking guess."

Brow furrowing tightly, Richie starts, the ring in his hand burning him like a brand in his palm, "wait - I thought this was like, to like - fuckin' hold while you washed, or something, so it wouldn't go down the fucking drain!"

Eddie sticks his soapy head out to glare at him.

"Richie, if you were any slower, you'd be going backwards."

"Alright, now that's just rude."

Rolling his eyes dramatically again, Eddie disappears behind the curtain to go back to washing.

"So... so - not happy," Richie surmises.

"You know how Bev seems to have found her father in her own age group, and latched on, like a force of habit?"

"Wouldn't say that shit directly to her face, but yeah."

"I did the same fuckin' thing."

"Oh."

"Yeah - *oh*."

It's quiet for another minute.

"Still there?"

"Still here," Richie reaffirms, sitting down on the tile floor, leaning against the bottom of his toilet, "I don't have anybody."

"... no one?"

"Not a soul," Richie says, pulling the jacket more tightly around him,

"Maybe it's because my parents didn't give a shit about me, so I had no one to like, get an Oedipus complex about."

"Shut the fuck up, Rich."

"I was strictly told not to shut the fuck up, actually, per your instructions."

"Then shift gears before I throw something at your head."

"Fair enough," Richie declares, leaning forward with a groan, "Anyone tell you I fucked up my back, when I fell? Pretty sure I like... need an actual doctor."

Looking up at the sound of curtains whipping to the side, Richie finds Eddie, shoulders and up, poking outside the water to stare worriedly at him.

"You're hurt?"

"I... I mean, I think? I'm also just an old fart, so like -"

"Back injuries can be really serious, Rich," Eddie impresses upon him, looking like a highly concerned, drowned cat.

Richie smirks at him, unable to stop himself, "I swear I'll see a chiropractor as soon as possible, Dr. K."

At first, it looks like Eddie is going to bite Richie's head off, and possibly go on a tangent about how correct he is to worry, and how negligent Richie is to not be as worried, but then his face melts into a nostalgic smile, and he says instead, "I forgot you used to call me that."

"I called you so much shit, dude, I can't expect you to remember each, and every shit nickname I gave you."

Vanishing behind the curtains again, Eddie insults him, "*you were* lazy with them."

"I was, like, ten! Give me a fuckin' break!"

"I'll give you a break when you've earned one, Richie."

"That I'll ever earn something in my life is an unfair expectation to set, Eddie."

"Why don't you have anybody?"

"What?"

Strangely, this time, Eddie doesn't show his face, though Richie can tell by the sound of the water falling that Eddie is standing quite still. He wonders why Eddie doesn't want to look at him.

Maybe he pities Richie too much.

Maybe he knows the answer.

Maybe he hates Richie a little bit, for the answer he already knows.

Richie wonders what the protocol is for an early exit, after a friend has come back from the dead; he wants to leave Derry in his rearview, and slam on the gas - he'd like it to be over, and over for good, now. Seems rude to do it so soon, though, after Eddie has somehow escaped the vacuum of the gaping maw of death.

Seems absurd to do; to have his childhood friend raise himself from the grave, and so soon after, say, 'anyway, it's been real - I'll text you sometime. Peace out,' and bounce.

He tries his best to squash the desire to run away, and puts some effort into engaging with Eddie like normal people do.

"I thought about getting married to a girl from UCLA, way back. Didn't work out, though."

"Why not?"

"She could tell I was in love with someone else."

"What? Why were you with her in the first place, if you -"

"You almost done, dude? It's been a hot fuckin' minute."

“Yeah - I - sorry - gimme a second.”

Made self-conscious now, Eddie scrubs hurriedly, and mostly in silence, and Richie whistles, to keep Eddie sure he’s there, even though Richie still isn’t totally convinced he’s not the one dreaming.

Once Eddie announces he’s ready to step out, Richie winds up swinging a towel over the top of the curtain rod, so Eddie can reach it, and dry off - Eddie asks to borrow clothes, and, on auto-pilot, Richie takes off the jacket, though he holds onto it, folding it over his forearm, and then he takes his own shirt off, and hands it over to Eddie.

He undresses until he can pass his boxers to Eddie, and then he slides his jeans back on.

“Uh - pants?”

“Yeah, about that - I packed my car with all my shit earlier, so, you’re gonna have to wait for me to run out to my suitcases before I can lend you anything else.”

“Did - wait - were you just wearing these?”

“Yeah.”

Eddie steps out of the shower, hair glistening, wound on his face already healed enough to have scarred, and it’s shining pink - Richie bangs his chest with a fist to get his heart started again.

His shirt hangs low on Eddie, the collar of it revealing most of his clavicle, and his boxers barely show at all, for how big the shirt is on him.

When Richie means to meet Eddie’s eyes, he finds that Eddie’s too busy staring at his midriff - just openly staring at Richie’s hips; it wouldn’t be so loaded, maybe, if they weren’t both very much aware of the fact that Richie was wearing nothing *but* his jeans.

“You want me to -”

“You feel far away.”

Pausing, Richie stills, and pulls Eddie's jacket in front of himself, toying with the fabric a bit.

"What do you mean?"

"I can't explain it any better than that."

Watching with some trepidation, Richie stands still as Eddie's arm raises, and his fingertips brush the skin of Richie's abdomen.

"Stop it."

"Stop what?" Richie asks.

"Stop being far away."

"I don't know how to stop it - it happens when shit's scary like this. I go away from myself."

"What brings you back?" Eddie insists.

"When I find out, I'll let you know."

Clearly, Eddie does not approve of that response; he curls his fingers into Richie's jeans, his knuckles burning against the jut of Richie's hipbone.

"Richie, why don't you have anybody?"

Frowning deeply, Richie realizes he has to lean into this one way, or another; either Eddie is alive, in front of him, and all of this is real, or none of it is real, and whatever he does, or doesn't do will have no real-life consequences.

"You know how you and Bev are alike?"

"Yeah."

"Ben and I are the same."

"Okay... *oh*," Eddie says, eyes going round, "... you mean Bev?"

"No, dipshit, I mean *you*."

“You mean me, what?”

“Jesus fucking Christ, Eddie - I’ve been in love with you for something like thirty years, okay? Alright? Is that enough?”

Neither withdrawing, nor pulling closer, Eddie stands still, and someone without rose-tinted glasses on might say he was gaping like a fish.

Luckily, Richie had no glasses, rose-tinted, or otherwise.

“You’re gaping like a fucking fish.”

“You’re gay?”

“Sort of.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that - I don’t fucking know, man! I fell in love with you, and I’ve wanted to fuck you since I knew fucking you was even an anatomical possibility, and I’ve had good, like, sexual experiences with women, but I never connected with them emotionally, I never... I never fell in love again. You were it for me.”

There’s a pregnant pause, and then Eddie asks, “are you saying all this because you think you’re dreaming?”

There are tears in Richie’s eyes again, and his throat feels tight.

He nods.

Eddie shifts on his feet, chewing the inside of his bottom lip.

It’s deeply distracting.

“What’s it like? Being in love with me?”

“Sucks, man,” Richie laughs wetly, pushing at one of his eyes with his wrist, wiping away any evidence of severe emotion, “I mean - it’s fucking beautiful, it’s like, it’s my youth, and it’s fun, and exciting, and makes me wanna laugh, and fuck, and eat, and *be a person*, you

know? That might sound gross, or stupid, but it's - it's like the most base thing in me, it's like this thing, this part of me that was always there, so it's kind of animal, but it's... it's fine. It's like - like how sunflowers turn toward the sun. I'm simple, and small, and what you make me feel is fucking enormous, and bright, and warm, and I'm not a star, so I... so I just lean more toward you. I always did."

"So, why does... why does it suck?"

"Cause you're *the fucking sun*, dude," Richie retorts, exhausted, "I haven't had the sun for fucking thirty-something *years*, so, yeah, it *sucks*. It sucks, Eddie. It's dark, and lonely, and I just want - I just want this one thing, this one, enormous, giant thing so badly, and it used to feel like this big fucking - this yawning chasm in me, right? I thought I was missing a part of myself, somehow, like I lost it somewhere along the line, and that made sense to me for the last twenty-two years, because, why would I be whole, right? Who the fuck is whole? No one in fucking L.A, I can tell you that much - I fit in, it made sense, I was sad, and lonely, and broken, and couldn't connect, and there was this deep, yawning chasm in me, and then I see you again, and I remember - oh! - there's such a boundless fucking vacuum in my soul, because that's where *the fucking sun was!*"

Richie's breathless, huffing with his arms spread out, looking and feeling helpless.

"Okay? So, it sucks. It's incredible, but it's... it's a lot," Richie concludes, flopping his arms back down to his sides, "It's a lot."

"Do you... if you're like Ben," Eddie begins nervously, "then... do you still want me?"

"Are you gonna run out if I say 'yes?'"

"No, I'm not gonna run."

"Then, yes," Richie answers gently, "I've never, ever stopped wanting you. Even when I didn't know there had ever been anything *to* want, or want *that badly* - even then. That alien, demon shit-for-brains could take away everything, but... not the *sun*. Not like that."

Richie stares down into Eddie's eyes, and he can see them clearly, because Eddie is all but standing on Richie's toes now; his other hand comes to cup Richie's jaw, and he pulls Richie down.

"Richie - you should kiss me."

"I don't think this is real," Richie confesses, his voice crackling.

"I'll make it real. I'll make it real, Richie," Eddie repeats, gripping onto him harder, "I'll - I'll - I don't know! I don't fucking know, man, but I'll prove to you I'm real. I'll hurt you - I'll bruise you, or bite you, or - I don't know! Just tell me what to do, and I'll... I'm real, Richie. I'm back. And we paid a pretty big fucking price for that - when you're ready to hear what Stan had to say, you'll get it, too, but... for now... make me real, Richie. Whatever you need. However you need it. Make me real."

Shaking his head, devastated, Richie lets out a sharp sob, and begins to tremble, "don't tell me I can have this, cause I - if I wake up, and it's all -"

Eddie digs his nails into Richie's skin, making him hiss, and Richie's heart doubles its speed.

"Stop it," Eddie commands, "Be brave, Richie. Make me real. However you need to."

"What if - what if I want you?" Richie begs, staring quizzically at Eddie, "What if I need to prove you're real with - what if what I need is something you don't want? What if I wanna take you to bed? What if I do that - force myself on you, or something, cause I *think* this is a dream, and then - if it's real -"

"Jesus, Richie," Eddie chuckles, "You just won't let yourself win, man. You love me, right?"

"Yes."

"You're *in* love with me, right?"

"Yes."

“Wow.”

“What?”

“I’ve just...” Eddie gazes at him, openly admiring him for a moment, and then shakes his head, smiling, “I’ve just never heard someone sound so sure about it before.”

“Eddie...”

“If you - okay, so, if you love me, and you’re in love with me, then you can *make* love, right?” Eddie asks, blushing to his ears, “That’s how it works, right? You have to be in love, to make love - not just fuck. Fucking is for teenagers, and pornos - love-making is different, right?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Richie admits, “I’ve never... I only ever loved you, so I have no idea how it’ll be different.”

“Fine. We’ll find out together,” Eddie decides, moving both his hands to Richie’s face, “Come here, already, you fucking idiot.”

He hops onto his toes, and pulls Richie down at the same time, kissing him fiercely; Eddie is so immediately warm, and the kiss is so tangible, so *real*, Richie gasps, his body beginning to tingle, and return to itself from the stratosphere - it’s when he gasps that Eddie licks him like a fucking kitten, like he’s shy about it, and Richie loses all coherent thought.

Of course Eddie would be shy about making out, Richie thinks to himself, remembering the nervous, tiger of a kid he once knew, still in his arms, lighting him up inside, Fucking putting his tongue in my mouth like he’s politely knocking on a neighbor’s door to borrow some fucking sugar. God, he’s perfect.

Grabbing Eddie around the waist, Richie lifts him off the ground - there’s a small, offended noise of disagreement, but Richie ignores it. He takes Eddie back into the bedroom, and deposits him on the bed, climbing on top of him, throwing Eddie’s jacket over one of the decorative pillows.

“If I do something you don’t want -”

“I want it all.”

“Okay, but if I do something you don’t like -”

“I’m *gonna* like it, Richie.”

“*Alright, dick-hole*, but if you need me to stop -”

“I need you to fuckin’ *start*, man!”

“*Jesus*, I knew you’d be a bossy little fuck in bed, I fuckin’ knew it.”

“You think about it that often?” Eddie asks flirtatiously.

Riding the high's and low's as they come, Richie grins at him, his eyes still glassy - he leans down to kiss Eddie’s mouth again, but just before he closes the distance, he answers, “*oh*, you have *no* fucking idea, Eds.”

Notes for the Chapter:

Explicit sex upcoming in the next chapter! (and yes, it'll be switching back to Eddie's POV again)

5. Tethered

Notes for the Chapter:

Smut! So much smut! This whole chapter is one big, sappy, lovey-dovey sex scene with lots of proclamations of gooey love from two very repressed gays that have been pining for each other since before puberty.

Also, even if it's fitting for the desperation of this chapter, please do not do this at home. Like. Please. Use lube. Use condoms. Be safe. Stretch, and stuff. These two idiots are v irresponsible this chapter, so uh do as i say, not as i write.

Richie is so desperate and beautiful above him, Eddie feels his chest constrict.

He cups Richie's neck, pulling him into a kiss he hopes sears Richie, and he bites Richie's lip with force enough that he hopes it stings. He hears Richie gasp, and it's as if Richie's inhalation fills up Eddie's lungs instead.

"Richie - Richie, I want you - God, I died - I died, and I was petrified, and I want you to ground me. I want - I wanna feel alive."

Nodding earnestly, eagerly, Richie leans back on his haunches, running his rough hands up Eddie's calves, cupping his knees, and sliding down his thighs, beneath the loose fit of Richie's borrowed boxers.

"How will I know any of this is real?"

"I don't know," Eddie sobs, holding his forehead with both hands, his body hotter than its ever been, "I don't know, but I'm - I feel like I'm gonna combust if you don't hold me down."

"Eddie, I love you."

Wide-eyed, and feeling like crying, though unsure as to why, Eddie

searches Richie's eyes, and Richie stares back loyally, beautifully.

"I love you. You're... you're where nightmares end. And I love you. I love you."

"I love you too," Eddie admits, feeling so strange saying those words, saying them to someone he's not married to, saying them, and meaning them for once, "Oh my God - I love you. I love you too, Richie. I should've found you. I should've spent these years with you. How the fuck am I - God - how the fuck am I going to make up for all that lost time?"

"Now's a good time to start," Richie whispers, kissing the inside of his knee, "I... I can ground us. Make us real. I will."

"I believe you."

Smiling tragically, Richie surges forward again, kissing him soundly, and wrapping his fingers around the waist of his boxers, pulling down.

Eddie lifts his hips to help Richie along, and tries not to be embarrassed that he's fully hard already - he's not been this excited about sex since he was a teenager, and it shows.

He flushes brightly when Richie pulls away from him for what appears to be the sole purpose of staring at the skin he's exposed. The very dark, satin-over-hot-stone skin he's exposed.

"I feel like I've been dreaming."

Richie's eyes move up his body, taking their time, until their eyes meet again.

"What?" Richie asks hungrily.

"Like, I was awake once - as a kid. There were colors, and memories, and sidewalk chalk, and ice cream, and seasons, and the world turned, and I *felt* shit. It was like walking through a dream state, the last twenty-seven years. I sort of saw that the seasons changed, and I knew there were colors, and flavors, and shit, but none of it... none of it mattered, really. The way - how, you know in dreams, you see

someone - like a co-worker, and you know it's them, but their face is wrong? You know that? How, in the dream, you acknowledge that that's not what they look like in real life, but your dream just insists it's them, and you roll with it, because it's a dream?"

"I... I think I get what you mean."

"That's what I was doing," Eddie tells him, moving Richie's borrowed shirt up his abdomen to his chest, revealing a skin tone that doesn't match his, patched into his middle - he knows Richie is staring at it with wide eyes, but he doesn't watch Richie for anymore reaction than that.

Stan was always a good deal paler than Eddie; it looks like patchwork, and it is.

"I could see my life, I could see it through the lens It gave us, and it was wonky, it wasn't right, it wasn't the way it was meant to be, it felt wrong kind of, but I felt that dream-way, that way... that thing, where you're an outside observer to your own life. I was just moving through the dream, even though it wasn't totally right. And it's like I'm awake again. I want - I want you to fuck me, Richie. I wanna make love with you, and I want ice cream, and I wanna read comics with you on a bed actually big enough for us both, and... I *feel* again. I'm awake. And a lot of it hurts, but that's... it's like, *because* it hurts, it's real. You know? It's... reassuring."

Richie's hand moves over Stan's skin, and he watches closely as Eddie's muscles quiver under his touch.

"I... I feel that too. I think I'm waking up too."

"Richie," Eddie beckons.

To his surprise, Richie responds immediately, crawling over him, awaiting instruction.

He swallows roughly, and says, "it's gonna be tight, I know. I don't mind if it hurts, though. It means I'm awake, and I... it's what I need right now."

"I don't wanna hurt you," Richie reminds him.

“I know, I know,” Eddie replies restlessly, touching at Richie’s arms, “I know, I just... I’ll tell you, okay? If it’s too much. For now, though, I want... I want you. For real.”

After a moment’s contemplation, Richie presents his middle and forefinger to Eddie’s lips.

Hoping he understands the cue, Eddie parts his lips and lets Richie’s fingers slide in over his tongue; he swirls his tongue around them, and remembers a summer day, twelve years old, eating five full bags of Razzles with Richie at the arcade, and he starts drooling.

He’d be embarrassed about that, if it were an intimate moment with anyone other than Richard Tozier.

Richie would be thrilled to know that sex with him reminded his childhood friend of eating too many Razzles, and playing long-forgotten arcade games with him. He’s sappy, and just weird enough to get it.

It’s as though all of Eddie’s senses are reminding him how impatient he is to start living again, and he’s sucking on Richie Tozier’s fingers, but the skin tastes like Razzles, summertime fun, and he knows without lube, without condoms, this is going to be difficult at best, but he wants it more than he’s wanted anything else before, because his entire life has been waiting for him for nearly three decades.

He feels the hefty weight of Richie’s cock against the incline of his hip, outlined in his too-tight jeans, and he wants to skip all the important parts, but he knows Richie won’t let them.

Once Richie seems satisfied, he takes his hand back, moves it down Eddie’s body, between his spread legs, and slowly breaches him.

At first contact, Eddie gasps, and his head fills up with pulsing blood, he can hear his heartbeat, and the contact isn’t nearly enough, but he’s really just glad that it’s not so bad a stretch at all.

It’s easy, even.

He’s relaxed.

It's okay - he's awake, he's alive, Richie loves him, and Richie's going to make him feel permanent again - somehow. He knows it, he trusts it.

"The other," Eddie orders on an exhale.

Looking more focused than Eddie can ever remember seeing him, Richie moves his forefinger in alongside the middle, and the stretch burns this time, but breathing steadily through it helps immensely. It means he's awake, he's alive - it hurts, just enough, and it's Richie - it's all okay. It's a little thrilling, in fact.

The two fingers move in and out of him patiently, stretching, spreading, and Richie's positively shameless about applying more spit to his fingers to keep the friction on the happy side of painful.

He kisses Eddie's hipbones, bites gently at the soft side of his thighs, licks a stripe up his cock, and even suckles at the head while he fingers Eddie, but Eddie nearly kicks him away to make it stop - it's not how he wants to come, and it's too perfect a combination of sensations to resist long.

"You okay?"

"Better," Eddie answers hotly, "Better than okay. When can I have you?"

"God, slow down, tiger," Richie laughs, "You've never done this before. Just - breathe. I wanna fit a third finger in before I -"

"No," Eddie tells him, "No - I don't wanna wait anymore -"

"It'll hurt if I do this too soon, Eddie -"

"I get it, I'm a risk fucking analyst - just listen to me."

Richie looks at him sternly, and waits a beat before saying, "I could say no, you know. I could tell you we should stop here, and make you wait until we actually have lube around."

"You won't."

“That sure?”

“Not because you don’t want that, but because you’d do anything for me - even hurt me. If I need it. And I need it. I’m asking you for it. We’ll take it slow, just - just give me what I need, Richie.”

“Fuck. God, fuck. Fuck - fine. Fuck,” Richie curses, taking his hand back to undo his pants, and shuck them down, and off the bed.

He leans down to kiss Eddie’s collarbone, down his chest, though he only very tenderly touches at the patched up skin at his middle, possibly frightened by it - maybe he’s worried, somewhere deep down, that if he touches the scar, the wound will reopen, and he’ll be back in It’s lair, holding Eddie while he dies all over again.

Richie’s touches are soft worship, so kind, so tentative, so much more patient than Eddie is willing to be.

“Richie, please -”

“I hear you, I hear you, Eddie, I swear, I just - I’m terrified,” Richie admits, his voice cracking at the end, his face hidden behind loose, hanging hair.

“It’s okay,” Eddie assures him, petting back some of his inky curls with a shaky hand, “You’re braver than you think.”

Richie looks to him, and they trade small smiles before Richie moves forward, nearly kissing him, but just hovering by his lips, “I’m an honest man, Eds. I know... I know you never planned for this - I mean, you and me. I know you wanted a normal life. I know I was never really part of... the picture. But, I want you to relax, okay? This is gonna change shit between us, but I’m a safe place to land, okay? I always will be for you.”

Wondering if anyone has ever loved him as sincerely as Richie Tozier does, Eddie nods, inhaling deep when he feels Richie’s enormous hands handle his thighs, just under his knees, and push back. The cool air that hits him makes everything tighten up, and flutter nervously, from his toes to his fingertips.

“I want you to hold my wrists down.”

Richie cocks a brow at him, “any... specific reason?”

“I think... I think I’ll wanna hide my face from you, and I’m sick of hiding. Especially from you. So. Hold me down, okay?”

Too undone by the way Richie is watching him, undone by how readily, easily, and silently Richie agrees to terms he barely understands, Eddie shuts his eyes; he thinks he hears Richie lick his palm, and slick himself - it should be disgusting, but it’s not.

He’s waited for this for something like twenty-two years.

When just the head of Richie’s cock breaches him, his breath catches - it burns, it feels heavy, thick, and he knows it’s gonna hurt, but it’s not enough to make him stop Richie.

It helps, that it hurts.

Once Richie is an inch or so deep, he stops holding himself steady, and instead moves his hands to Eddie’s wrists, holding them down as promised.

Being stretched on Richie alone is a lot - Eddie thinks to himself a little hysterically that he can’t believe the one thing he never believed about Richie’s jokes was the one thing that was totally true; his cock is huge, and Eddie can feel every inch of it as it slips into him.

Let him in , Eddie urges his body, trying to relax his muscles, *Let him in. Let him in.*

He needs it so badly, needs to feel Richie so badly, he’s so glad to feel the pain of it, he hopes it never ends.

“Are you -”

“I’m okay,” Eddie breathes out, hands going numb from where Richie’s hold on his wrists is blocking blood flow, “I’m okay. Don’t stop.”

“Eddie, I -”

"I know," Eddie cries out, tears slipping from his eyes as Richie moves deeper into him, "I know. I don't know how I know, but I know. Love isn't enough - it's not a strong enough word. I know, I wanna say it to you too, but it's not enough. I met you, I met you, and I saw you, and I loved you, and it was forever, and it's been - it's been like that ever since, I know, I know."

"God, Eds, I love you, and it's not enough -"

"The words aren't - you're enough, Richie," Eddie tells him, "God, you're so much more than enough, Richie. You're perfect - you're perfect."

Bending on a sob, Richie sways deeper into him, Eddie gasps again, and Richie's grip gets harder.

"Tell me what you need."

"You, only you," Eddie whispers back, arching his sore back, and using his legs to push at the back of Richie's thighs and encourage him further.

Once Richie's bottomed out, they both exhale sharply, and Richie stays still, moving his hands from Eddie's wrists, down his forearms, his triceps, over his heaving chest, until he can wrap his arms around Eddie's back, and pull him close.

"Th-there's so much of you," Eddie mumbles, meaning it in multiple ways.

Huffing a laugh, Richie tells him, "I always thought that was a bad thing."

"It's a beautiful thing," Eddie breathes out, "Richie, I - I waited so long to live."

"I know, Eds," Richie says back sympathetically, "I did too. We get to do it together now, though."

"Don't leave me, Rich," Eddie begs without knowing why, bringing his arms up to Richie's back, curling his nails into the skin of Richie's shoulder-blades.

“Never,” Richie promises, moving gently out of him, and back in, “Never again.”

The tears keep coming, even though Eddie thinks he’s happy - happy might not be right the word, though. He’s something unknowable, a maelstrom of emotion, as if his feelings had all been shelved for a later date over the last twenty some-odd years, and the shelf just collapsed.

Stan loved them.

Eddie has loved his friends his entire life, even when he didn’t know they were out there to love, and he made a nest with a vulture that picked on him while he died of normalcy, and all the seasons, and the colors, and the ice cream flavors passed him by.

He’s been in love with Richie Tozier since he was around thirteen years old, and he still is, and maybe that means he never grew up. Not really. But he doesn’t mind. If Richie doesn’t mind, then he doesn’t mind.

My mind’s a mess , Eddie thinks to himself, unable to catch any coherency in the vortex taking up all of his skull.

“That’s good,” Eddie praises, hoping Richie will be willing to move faster soon, wanting more, faster, “It’s good, Richie - you feel - you feel incredible.”

“Jesus, Eddie,” Richie mutters into Eddie’s neck, sounding ragged, “You’re perfect. I knew you’d be - I knew you’d be perfect for me, and I - God, I - I’m never gonna get over this.”

“Don’t get over me,” Eddie tells him, tightening his legs and arms around Richie, “Never get over me. Keep us like this forever, Richie.”

“God, anything for you, Eddie,” Richie vows, rolling his hips like waves lapping the shore.

Richie’s entire body moves over him like a spell being woven; between hypnotizing, syrupy movements that force small, mindless noises out of Eddie’s throat, he can manage to open his eyes. When he does, he’s watching Richie’s muscles undulate, flex, swerve, and

none of it is rough, or scary like he once imagined sex like this would be.

The stretch still burns a touch, but he's mostly acclimated, and so there's nothing else to feel but how beautiful it is, and from the mop of black curls on Richie's head, to the way his feet are arched on the bedsheets to help him keep his posture above Eddie, it's fucking *gorgeous*.

He didn't want them to know this part of him, Eddie thinks to himself, grasping at whatever flesh he can on Richie's back, clawing at him, gasping, groaning, overcome, He didn't want me to know this side of him. He didn't want any of us to know how he could love me. He doesn't know how beautiful this is. He was going to take this to his grave. I can't believe I let him keep this love from me.

His entire body is burning up, everything feels molten hot, there are pins and needles in his hands and feet, his head is swimming, he feels bruises forming all over from wherever Richie bites, kisses, sucks, and grips him - it's easily the most intense experience he's ever had, emotionally, or physically.

"I feel close to you," Eddie observes, wondering at how the friction of Richie's abdomen moving along his cock keeps him just on the edge of orgasm, "Is - is it working? Are - *unh* - God - Richie - are y-you back to yourself?"

"I'm back to *you*," Richie's deep rasp of a voice answers, thrusting deeper into him, drawing out a low cry.

"Lemme - Jesus, *fuck* - lemme see your eyes," Eddie slurs desperately, still holding tight to Richie's scratched up shoulder-blades.

Richie moves his face away from where he's tucked it against Eddie's, and shows himself to Eddie.

Face flushed dark, hair a complete mess, lips kiss-swollen, his pupils are blown wide, he's cried, his lashes are clumped together in that telling way, and his eyes have never been so blue.

"I lost you."

It's nearly too quiet to catch, but Eddie hears him.

"You got me back."

"Do I - I - *fuck* - do I get to keep you this time?"

"Forever, Richie - forever," Eddie answers, imagining writing wedding vows, imagining getting the fuck out of New York, moving in with Richie somewhere, anywhere, talking about a family, making a future, a life, being awake, "Forever. Keep me forever, Richie."

One firm, wiry arm slides out from under Eddie's back, and its calloused hand moves through a thin sheen of sweat over his chest, and middle, down until Richie's hand is wrapped tightly around his cock.

Instantly, Eddie arches his back, digs his nails harder into Richie, uses his heels to pull Richie more into himself, and, involuntarily, his mouth opens, and he cries out, "Jesus, fuck, yes, please - please, Richie!"

He thinks he hears Richie cursing creatively somewhere beyond the blood rushing around in his head, but he can't really make any sense of it.

All he can think is, *I'm coming, I'm coming, Oh, God, I'm coming, Richie is making me come, **Richie** is making me come, Richie, Richie, **Richie**, **Richie*** - and he might even be saying it all out loud, but all he knows next is his body spasming, locking up, and the longest, most powerful orgasm of his life ripping through him.

He's adrift for a few seconds, but then he's on the surface of the planet again, the way he wanted to be - he's not weightless, there's pain here and there on his body, and Richie is still in him, still part of him, making him feel connected to life, to the Earth, to him - he can't name what he feels, but whatever it is, it's wonderful. The most wonderful thing he's ever felt.

"I - I can pull out, if you -"

"Come inside me," Eddie huffs out, his heartbeat feeling like a hammer on anvil, "I want it. I wanna feel it. Come, Richie."

“God, fuck - fuck, *fuck* - *Eddie*, I -” Richie struggles, his hips stuttering.

“*Yeah* - fuck, yeah, like that,” Eddie encourages, “Tell me. Tell me, Rich.”

“I’m gonna come,” Richie’s voice crackles out, “Fuck - you’re so fucking perfect - *fuck* - *Eddie* - *Eddie* -”

Eddie feels when Richie spills in him, and he watches, rapt, captivated as Richie’s entire face changes, looking pained, agonized, strangely attractive in its vulnerability, and then suspended in tranquility.

Richie stays entwined with him, seems reluctant to part, even, and Eddie’s tears are still flowing, but they’re not of sadness. Shock, maybe, happiness, possibly - they’re quiet, and calm, though, and Richie is warm, and heavy, and strong, and he feels tethered back to the Earth. He feels permanent again.

He pets over the skin he scraped on Richie’s shoulder-blades, nearly apologetic.

“You okay?”

“Honestly, I don’t remember what it’s like to be okay, Eds, but I’m in love with you, and you’re here with me, so... yeah. I... I think I’m gonna be okay.”

Unable to stop himself, Eddie says softly, “you are a good, honest man, Richie.”

Richie answers by kissing him sweetly, and Eddie knows they’ll shower again, but he’s in no rush now.

He hardly remembers what life is supposed to feel like, not physically bonded to Richie, so he finds it difficult to care about.

“You think that old candy shop in downtown still sells Razzles?” Eddie asks against Richie’s lips.

“Uh - probably? Why?”

“Wanna share Razzles with you.”

Snorting a laugh, Eddie feels Richie’s abs contract against him as he chuckles, and responds, “that’s high romance, Eds.”

Eddie tends to agree.